

Bullets and Blood in the Land of Clay Houses

CHRISTOPHER PYLE

A keychain, wholly unremarkable, sits in the back of my desk drawer. It's easy to miss amidst the collection of random knick-knacks and junk that's accumulated throughout the years. It may be haphazardly tossed in with trinkets that have lost their purpose, but I never forget it's there. Attached to a flat, coiled key ring, is a chain of three links of flattened metal, bent into elliptical shapes.

It's December. We're operating in Tal Afar; the only major urban area within fifty miles of Mosul. This city is the exemplar of urban decay. It looks like it once could have been a budding city, but never quite made it. The buildings, no taller than three stories, are made of mud bricks, tin and cement, sandy colored, brown, or grey. In stark contrast, the doors of most buildings are either bright blue or red. The streets are paved, but of cracked asphalt. Potholes scar the roads from violence of both distant and recent past, and bullet holes mar the sides of buildings. The curbsides are striped yellow with fading and chipping paint. Trash and filth pollute the streets, as if people throw their trash and empty their "bathrooms" in the road. Nobody seems to care, much less notice. In the denser areas, cables for electricity and television crisscross from building to building like a tangled electric web. It's in the desert, but not the stereotypical picture of rolling sand dunes; it's more of a pervasive dust in the air, clinging to everything

it touches: streets, buildings, vehicles. Despite the apparent poverty and violence, signs of a struggling capitalistic economy are everywhere. Billboards and banners written in the cursive calligraphy of Arabic and Kurdish advertise modern conveniences, like cell phones. Posters advertising for or against someone running for political office are plastered onto the sides of buildings. The streets are congested with too many cars of little variety, dirt bikes, and donkey-drawn carts pulled by kids.

I've been in the platoon only a few days and I am excited to be returning to a scout platoon and assume the role of gunner on the Platoon Sergeant's Stryker. I show a confident exterior, but I conceal a condensed, compressed little storm of doubt, unease, and fear. It churns like the eye of Jupiter deep inside my gut. I ignore the maelstrom and scan my sector of fire. This is why we're here. This is why I am here. I am a "trigger puller."

At the end of the short shackle is an emblem for an Opel sedan. Sometimes, when I'm in a pensive mood, I pull it out of the drawer, slide my index finger into the ring, and let it rest in my palm. I find it deeply unsettling that its scarred texture and metallic luster resemble my titanium wedding band, only two fingers over. Examining the keychain with a squinted gaze, almost a sneer, the corners of my mouth condense into a frown. I take great care to ensure it doesn't touch my ring finger, fearful that through accidental touch, the essence of the keychain could somehow contaminate the ring on my finger. I inhale deeply and sigh, contemplating the time I spent in the ancient lands of Mesopotamia. It feels like a lifetime ago.

It's January. We're on a routine patrol driving through the city in what could be described as a business district. Flanked on both sides of the street by buildings,

perhaps fifty feet high, I've grown so accustomed to scanning above my head that it's become a natural reflex. I look up to the left, and then to the right, watching for movement in open windows and on ledges. Without warning, a tight, powerful blast breaks the calm, and acrid yellow smoke tarnishes the blue sky. The radio erupts in my helmet's earpiece.

"Contact! Grenade thrown from a window, right side!" Staff Sergeant Thomas, or Blue Two, yelled over the distorted radio.

Within seconds, I see a Kurdish man in an athletic jumpsuit bolt from a doorway on the right side of the street, tearing across the road like a horse out of the starting gate.

"I see him! Can I shoot?! Can I shoot?!" I yell through my helmet's microphone to Sergeant First Class Rummer, the Platoon Sergeant, who is standing in an open hatch behind me.

"Roger! Do it! Shoot him!" barked Sergeant Rummer, his voice terse but not panicked.

This guy was close. Too close for my oversized grenade launcher. I'd have to use my rifle. And fast. His feet connect with the ground. Left, right. Left, right, I'm lining up a shot. It's difficult using my rifle with my vehicle crewman's helmet. The awkward shape of the earpiece as it protrudes out from the helmet makes looking through my rifle sights an enormous challenge, which I hadn't anticipated. With my thumb, I rotate the safety switch from 'safe' to 'fire'. I can hear my breathing, heavy and fast inside my head as if I were in a spacesuit. He's still running. Right, left. Right, left. There's no time to control my breathing. No time to get a better shot. I'm running out of time, and I

need to do it now. I squeeze the trigger. Once. Twice. Three times. Four and five. In a flash, my enemy has vanished, I missed my target. I curse under my breath, angrily asking myself why I didn't set my rifle to three round burst.

The metal of the keychain feels cold; scratched and pitted with wear. Who knows how old it is? Staring at the aluminum insignia, I can see the lines and grooves of my palms through the key chain's open space. I see my hands, but I don't even know if they're mine anymore. The places these hands have been and the things they've done feel like a distant memory. For better or worse, I wonder if I'm the same person I once was.

It's February. We're in a neighborhood of Tal Afar called Al Surai. This particular part of the city is crowded with too many little shanty houses of mud, brick, and tin; built practically on top of each other. This slum seems to be even more impoverished than the rest of the city. The streets here aren't even paved, and they're old, ill-maintained, and littered with things that people no longer want. Plastic bottles and cardboard trash blend in with the mud in the road from a recent rain. Homemade fences made of scavenged wire and random collected metal junk pen the goats who chew their food with disinterest to our presence. But this is a living, breathing place. Not just made of things, but of people. Men and women live their lives here. Families care for their children here. And unfortunately, people are shooting at Americans here.

Bullets are flying. I swing my beast of a machine gun towards the squat brown building. Grabbing both charging handles, I pull back with all my strength and let it slam forward. The sound it makes is deep and metallic, telling me that it's loaded. I swallow hard. Aiming at the house of mud and brick, I slide the large safety switch at the bot-

tom of my oversized grenade launcher from the big 'S' all the way over to the big 'F'. I grasp the firing handles with both hands. Despite the sweltering heat, the plastic sheath covering the gun's metal handles feels cool to the touch. I inhale deeply and depress the butterfly-shaped trigger with my thumbs. With some resistance, the gun comes to life. It's a symphony of moving parts; and I am its conductor. The vehicle shakes as the heavy mechanisms of the gun slam violently to-and-fro, like a terrible engine of steel and death. Grenades explode from the barrel with a satisfying 'shink', 'shink', 'shink.' The rhythm of its firing is somehow reassuring. My rounds are on target, except for two, which sailed right over the roof of that house. I had no idea where those grenades went, or more accurately, where they landed.

The key chain's metallic surface feels especially hard. When I hold and squeeze it in my hand, I get the sense that it's unbreakable. With its tiny imperfections, it almost looks like it could have been hand-forged. It seems timeless, like it could exist unchanged forever. Unlike people, the passage of time has no effect on this little object. Emotions and memories of my past have been permanently etched into the metal, in a code that only I can read. I know it, and I get a sense that it knows me.

It's March. My Stryker is down for repairs. The platoon is carrying on with three trucks instead of four. I'm temporarily assigned to another vehicle while mine is being repaired. Not manning the big machine gun, but serving as a "dismount", as we call them. If the platoon encountered enemy contact or any other situation which required boots on the ground, several things would happen. We'd stop, the ramp would drop, and I'd get out. Aware of my role as a dismount, I'm expecting that to happen quite often. We're driving around the city on another routine patrol. Sitting on the hard bench in the back of the Stryker, I can't see what's

going on in the world outside. All I see are the dim lights of the radios and electronic displays, and Staff Sergeant Doesken, from the waist down, who is standing on top of the opposing bench, manning the rear hatch in the ceiling. It's dusty in here. The air tastes like chalk. The rumble and whine of the massive engine is louder down here than when I'm standing out of the gunner's hatch. Its dissonant rhythm lulls me into sleepiness. With my rifle pointed down, the barrel touching the floor, I prop my chin on the rifle's buttstock and let my mind wander. The darkness inside is punctuated by intense bright light flooding in at sharp angles from the open hatches above. I can see the dust swirling in little eddies inside the streams of sun.

I jolt to alertness when I hear three snaps from outside. Gunfire. We quickly accelerate. The vehicle whips swiftly to the left, then hard to the right. There's no available crewman helmet, so I can't hear the radio chatter, and I have no idea what's going on. I make the assumption that we're chasing a car. We would sometimes get involved in vehicle chases with cars through the narrow, winding alleyways of the ancient city. They really were a lot of fun, to be honest. It was always so exciting to chase after a car, like U.S. Marshals chasing bank robbers on horseback in the Wild West. Unfortunately, sitting on the inside, I can't see what's going on, and frankly, I'm feeling like I'm missing all the fun. It appears I was wrong, the ramp would not be dropping nearly as frequently as I'd expected.

My Section Sergeant, Staff Sergeant Doesken, leans down from his hatch and pulls off his helmet. He looks at me with his ridiculously good-natured grin.

"Hey, Chris, you bored?" he asks with an almost giddy inflection in his voice.

“I am totally bored down here. What’s goin’ on out there, Sarn’t?”

“You wanna help carry a body?” His grin grows twice the size, and his eyes widen to a comic extent. His face is almost a caricature of itself.

“Fuck yeah I do!” I exclaim, with overenthusiasm.

After what felt like an eternity in the back, we stopped, the ramp dropped, and I got out. The sun seemed especially bright after being in relative darkness for the last two hours. I shield my eyes as they adjust to the sun. My foot leaves the ramp and makes contact with the ground. The gravel churns under my boots. Getting my bearings, I look to my left and see dismounted soldiers from the other trucks nearby in an alleyway. They stood next to a red car, crashed into a wall of the alley. It’s an Opal, a car popular in most parts of the world, but not in America. On the dusty ground in front of the Opal was an unfurled body bag, already loaded with its cargo by the time I arrived.

“This the driver of the car?” I asked.

“Roger, Sarn’t.” I hear from one of the soldiers in the crowd.

“Grab a handle.” Said somebody else.

The grey vinyl bag was rectangular in shape and had six handles evenly spread out. It took six of us to carry him. Lifting the weight of a man isn’t so bad when it’s spread out across six people, but carrying him down an uneven hill covered with gravel isn’t easy. Private Brandenburg, who had the front handle by the head, tripped over some rocks and actually fell over of the body. A gash formed in the canvas bag from getting snagged on a rock, and chunky

red liquid oozed from the bag onto Private Brandenburg's desert camouflage pants, staining his knee a grisly brownish red.

"Awww, man! Shit!" Brandenburg sighed as he picked himself up. After re-slinging his rifle behind his back, he again grabbed his handle as several soldiers laughed and joked at his misfortune.

We walked up the ramp of one of our vehicles and unceremoniously plunked the body bag down on the floor. I walked back to the car and looked at Staff Sergeant Jarvis, who stayed with the car.

"What's the plan for the car, Sarn't?"

"Orders are we burn it, so the enemy can't use it again. You're not normally a dismount so you've never done one of these before, huh?" he says with a slight chuckle and a grin.

I shrug, being unsure of how to properly respond. Sergeant Jarvis, normally a stoic man of very serious demeanor, isn't known for chuckles or grins, so it catches me somewhat by surprise.

"Here ya go," he says, cocking his head back, gesturing with his chin.

He slaps a red cylinder into my left hand. It's an incendiary grenade. These have a thermite and magnesium fuse. Instead of making a bang like a regular grenade, these make fire; fire that could melt through a block of solid steel. Sergeant Jarvis pulls out a collapsible baton from a pouch on his vest. With a flick of the wrist, it snaps open. With a single, effortless swing, he smashes out the front passenger window of the car.

“Okay, Pyle. Go ahead.”

I slip my index finger into the ring attached to the pin at the top of the grenade, and pull. With some friction, and a loud “ping”, the pin pops out. I toss the grenade into the open window and take a few steps back. For several seconds, nothing happens. Then suddenly, flames engulf the little red car almost as fast as they appeared, consuming the interior as if it were only kindling. Flames start to rage out of the broken windows and I can see the red paint around the window’s edges begin to bubble and blacken. I turn around and begin to walk back toward my vehicle.

“Hey, Sergeant Pyle! I got somethin’ for ya!” Staff Sergeant Jarvis calls out to me.

I turn around and he tosses something in my direction. I see a glimmer of metal in the sunlight and outstretch my hand and catch it. It’s a car key attached to an Opel key chain, just like the car we’d just charred. It’s a hollow circle, only slightly bigger than a quarter, with a single stylized lightning bolt breaking through its circumference.

Staff Sergeant Jarvis and I walk back toward our vehicles.

“What kind of gun did you find in the car?” I ask, trying to make small talk.

He looks at me intently for a moment, then abruptly jerks his head back, facing front.

“We found some ammo in the car, but no gun.”

I climb in and sit back down in the back of the Stryker. Watching the ramp ascend and lock into place, as the bright sunlight is displaced by darkness, my thoughts

swirl around what he just told me. I wonder what happened to the gun, and in the back of my mind, I have my reservations about whether the dead man in the canvas bag is even the right guy.

Even as the years have passed, as I look closely at the key chain's lightning bolt, I can still find little speckled clumps of fine yellow Iraqi dust tucked inside the sharp corners of its zig and its zag. It's funny how the dust has clung to the keychain, almost becoming a part of it. I've never thought about washing it off, and I am quite sure I never will.